

The Epistle to the Romans

Reading Summary

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Chapter 8

Chapter 8 continues the commentary on Romans by focusing on the (Holy) Spirit. Barth places the role of the Spirit as the one that allows humanity to realize that by being in Christ, we are made a new creation. He states: “The Spirit is the ‘Yes’ from which proceeds the negative knowledge which men have of themselves. As negation, the Spirit is the frontier and meaning and reality of human life: as affirmation, the Spirit is the new, transfigured reality which lies beyond this frontier” (272).

Barth continues by discussing that the new creation is the mission of the sending of Jesus Christ. He uses the somewhat difficult language of Jesus Christ being sent in the “likeness of sin-controlled flesh” in order for Christ to “speak the death-sentence over sin in the midst of the flesh” (280). Barth ties his “likeness” language to his overall use of “parable” language and links his doctrine of election to those of us who are in the Spirit instead of the flesh.

Another major area that Barth touches on is the relation of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead being equated with the same Spirit that is within us. Barth makes a contrast between death and life in which he discusses this in light of the resurrection (although he does not place a bodily resurrection within time).

Barth also offers an unconventional discussion on the *ordo salutis* passage of Romans 8:28-30. His exegesis of Romans 8:28 uses Job as an illustration for loving God, in which Barth redefines “love” of something that cannot be observed. He grounds the calling to love God in Spirit and in truth in God Himself. (325) He connects the rest of verse 30 with the love of 1 Corinthians 13:7.

Chapter 9

Barth begins his chapter with an exposition of various names and attributes for God, quickly moving into contrasting the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the church (in which Barth also uses the term “Israel” to refer to the church). Barth ties the Gospel to God making Himself known in revelation. For Barth, the contrast between the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and the church is the

difference between God and humanity. The visible church points to the invisible God. He again draws on his “parable” language by stating “Whenever we fail to perceive the incorruptible in the parable of the corruptible, we have served the church and not the Gospel” (333). Barth uses the concept of the disagreements within the church to point to the difference between the Gospel and the church.

While (according to Barth) “the Church means suffering, not triumph” (334), humans are to remain in and participate in the church in order to properly have a relationship with God. He uses the illustration of Paul being with his own people (the Pharisees) as an example of why humans are to remain with the church.

Barth also states that the church does not necessarily bring new concepts about God to humanity, but that God is doing new work in the church. He states as follows: “humanly speaking, everything relevant has been said and heard already; and that at humanity’s highest eminence there is always erected a Church of some kind or other, as a living witness in history that men have exhausted every human possibility” (338).

Barth also sets up a contrast between the visible church (what he terms the church of Esau) and the invisible church (what he terms the church of Jacob). He also ties both terms to God being both the God of wrath and mercy.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 links back to the church’s suffering of Chapter 9 in which Barth begins by focusing on the church’s knowledge of God. Barth refers to this as a “krisis of knowledge”, first to the “Gentiles” (Barth’s term for humanity outside the church) then to “Israel” (Barth’s term for humanity inside the church). Barth equates faith and religion to works when he states: “When the Church speaks of faith, however, it means notoriously a profitable ‘something,’ which men of the world can ‘have,’ and which this or that man can strive after, attain, and boast about. But how can such a human work be the faith by which men are justified by God?” (366). The church suffers because it has avoided God (according to Barth). Barth also offers a unique exegesis on the doing

of the law when he states: “to do the law means to comprehend that human righteousness comes into being only through the majesty of the nearness of God and of His election. Human righteousness exists only in order to bear witness to that nearness and to that election” (376). He considers Jesus Christ to be even “the goal to which all law and all religion move” (383).

Barth places Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God in this chapter. He unpacks this discussion in light of Jesus Christ being the stumbling block and cornerstone of Romans 9:32-33. Barth also refers to Christ as the new man, and he considers the resurrection of Jesus Christ to be Lord, “the master key which opens every door” (383), eliminating the Jew/Gentile distinction.

Chapter 11

Barth continues his discussion of Paul’s thought in Romans by addressing the question, “Did God cast off his people?” (Rom. 11:1). “His people” are the religious - Israel and the Church - who, through the law, through religion, ethics, and human faith, have been confronted by the righteousness of God and shown not to possess it (231). Those in the church are, in actual fact, the unchurched. “The desperate situation of the Church cannot be exaggerated;” the “church” is the church of Ahab and Jezebel, those against whom Elijah complained (394). “Can we escape from that essential atheism of the Church?” (391).

The negative question, exposed by the word of God, is answered through the miracle of election (396). While the historical church of Jacob was determined to be the church of Esau, in Christ, the church of Esau is actually determined to be the eternal and invisible church of Jacob (395). The “No!” spoken by God against the Church is the basis for the “yes” (398). The “catastrophe of the Church pre-supposes the breaking forth of the redemption” (414). The two operations of God, reprobating and electing, are actually one; the “rejection of the elect,” in fact, establishes the elect (419).

It must be understood that Barth is not concerned with *historical* groups of people. There are no actual groups of people who could be sorted, differentiated, or counted. The fact that Paul *uses* groups of people in the discussion has “no more than a demonstrative significance” (415). His concern is existential; the church, the gentiles, and the elect are not particulars, but, “contrary to the plain meaning of the text” (395), represent the actual situation of the whole of humanity. All appear religious, but are not. The church of Jacob is shown to be the church of Esau through “the utter humiliation of the word of God” (396). Yet, God’s gracious decision in Christ has revealed the justification and election of the church. All are elected in Christ, not a particular number. The issue is existential and epistemological. Man’s true self in Christ is revealed “for those who have eyes to see it” (396).

Romans 11:32 is the “joyful,” “comforting,” and “amazing” comment which summarizes Paul’s (and Barth’s) theology as it relates to these chapters. “For God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.” In this verse, the “final meaning of double predestination seeks to make itself known” (421). Through this summary, Paul’s key terminology, “God, Righteousness, Man, Sin, Grace, Death, Resurrection, Law, Judgement, Salvation, Election, Rejection, Faith, Hope, Live, and the Day of the Lord” are understood (421); this is Barth’s gospel message. In Christ all are judged, and in Christ all are shown mercy.

Chapters 12-16

After the climax of Chapter 11, Barth discusses the problem of ethics. Paul does not completely switch topics, but remains focused on the “mercy of God.” The mercy has now been transformed into an exhortation, which relates the eternal to the temporal (427), a demand which “grace should come into its own” in man (428). The primary behavior called for in the exhortation is the true worship of God, the sacrifice of man because of the judgement of God seen in the gospel (431). It is only on this basis that the secondary behavior, ethical behavior, can follow (431).

However, because the ethical behavior is grounded in the repentance of men judged by the gospel, the so-called ethical behavior can be nothing more than a “parable” of life in the true kingdom of God (435). The current church is the church of Esau; it can only reflect and hope for the church of Jacob (450). Even concerning political ethics, the revolutionary must realize that he will only replace evil with evil. This is no argument for a legitimate human government, however, because even the government put in place by God is a human work and therefore not of God (477).

We *are* commanded to love. Specifically, we are commanded to love our neighbor, a command which is not law or religion, but an understanding of the gospel, itself. The ‘neighbor’ (by which Barth seems parallel to ‘Gentile’ from the previous chapter) confronts us with our own finitude, and therefore reveals to us our own lost state and sin (494). In the ‘other,’ then, we see ourselves. And if the gospel is true (494), in the neighbor, we see the rejection of, and the choice for, the ‘neighbor’ and for ourselves. The confrontation of God in the ‘other’ reveals the unity we have with the ‘other’ - a “fellowship. . . which is grounded - and therefore broken! - in the knowledge of God” (495). Love, then, is not of the temporal world, but the eternal. It is not of the current man, but the action of the new man in Christ (496), the miracle, to which we can only point (498).

Barth closes his book (chapters 15 and 16) by reminding readers that the truth Paul expresses is the universal truth of God. Paul, and Paul’s book are not to be believed in - “it is possible to believe only in God!” (527). The epistle cannot be treated as a rationalistic system or as doctrine developed from “religious emotion” (527). Paul, like Barth, appeals to the “universal feeling for truth” which any “Gentile” can “say without any assistance” (528). *Romans* (Paul’s and Barth’s) is not concerned with religion or history, but theology, concentrated not on doctrine or religious foundation, but on Jesus Christ.